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ABSTRACT

Speech communicators need to return to applied research, developing theoretical statements about how groups might work better and testing the validity of those statements. Among the tasks that group communication researchers might take up are determining the range of applicability of generalizations concerning different kinds of groups, studying the factors that increase or decrease the probability that a minority will accept majority opinion, studying creative groups to determine the range of generalizability for current theoretical statements, and questioning category systems currently in use. They might also manipulate factors that are used to distinguish groups to see whether manipulating those factors alters the probabilities of outcomes in predictable ways, look at how groups have learned from their past successes or failures, attempt to perceive and specify the underlying rules that seem to govern the discourse of rule-governed groups, and see how information processing leads to impression formation of others in the group and how that impression affects one's behavior toward each of the others. (TJ)

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Directions of Small Group Research for the 1980's

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Marshall McLuhan once commented that he was especially well qualified to perceive the effects of the highly developed communication systems in the United States because he was observing these phenomena from outside, from the safe and relatively undeveloped confines of Canada. By this criterion, I am especially well qualified to comment on the state of small group research and the directions it should take since I am not involved in such research and so can speak from the relatively safe confines of my undeveloped state.

I wish that I were as sanguine as McLuhan about the advantages of observing and prophesying from such a pristine state. It is certainly easier to criticize the research of others and to say what kinds of research ought to be done than it is to do the research, but the hazards of naivete are great. I do not even have the advantage that I had in 1970 of having reviewed a good flood of manuscripts about small group research that had been submitted to Speech Monographs for publication. Therefore, I offer these comments today with some hesitancy. As my friend McLuhan would say, these are "probes," intended to stimulate thought and debate and, I hope, some fruitful research.

One of the most important developments in the social sciences that we have seen in many years is the growth of policy research, applying the theory and research methods of a field to major public policy questions and testing one's generalizations in the public world.

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This is especially interesting for us in speech communication because that is where we came from, and this trend in other fields occurred just at the time that we had moved largely away from such applied research in order to be more "scientific." (It is not unlike our disavowal of the term "rhetoric" just before the time that other fields began to see its values and to give it great currency.) I would suggest that we need to move back in that applied direction. This means, for me, developing not the sorts of prescriptive theories of group processes that dominated the speech literature in the thirties and forties, but rather (1) developing theoretical statements not simply about how groups work, but how they might work better and (2) testing the validity of those theoretical statements by getting various kinds of groups in the community to adopt them to see whether, in fact, their operations are improved.

For example, one line of research that needs doing is that which helps us to set policy regarding the electoral system for city councils. There are disputes in communities throughout the United States today concerning the question of whether city councils operate "better" or "more responsibly" when members of the council are elected by wards or precincts, so that each member has a particular and different constituency or whether they operate "better" or "more responsibly" when all are elected at large. To date, as far as I have been able to determine, all of the debate on this question has been done on the basis of biases and assumptions. I have heard noone cite empirical data or small group research to support a claim. I suspect this is because noone has relevant data or theory.

A related dispute, also involving city governments, is one for which we may have some relevant data and theory already. This dispute concerns

whether a mayor should be elected by the other members of the city council of the community, so that there is no special allegiance to the council. The question is which type of mayor works better with the group of council members for the best interests of the city. I don't know whether our work on leadership can provide guidance for the resolution of this question. At the minimum, we need some thorough analysis of those data that we have, and probably some further testing, to determine their validity for this particular type of situation.

One difficulty with policy research, of course, is that it requires each of us to determine which way is up, a more problematic task than may be immediately apparent. For this task, we must make salient to ourselves and others the value systems--the ideologies--that control our perceptions of which goals for a type of group, such as a city council, are desirable and which are undesirable. This sort of admission of one's value system, to either self or others, traditionally has been considered contrary to scientific objectivity. Some contemporary observers argue that much of our past research is flawed because of our adherence to this tradition. That may or may not be the case. However, it will be a flaw--in my opinion--if we try to maintain that traditional stance when we are doing policy research.

Based on the Cragan-Wright report and my more direct but limited study of the literature, I believe that group communication scholars have neglected some important dependent variables. For example, in much of our research we looked at groups whose task was the solution of a mathematical or logical problem, so we had a clear criterion of "success." For the tasks that most groups face, though, the criteria of success are far less clear, and

we have no sound basis for assuming that whatever we have found out about the relationships between communication and success in solving mathematical or logical problems holds for solving these other types of problems. I would suggest that one of our tasks in the next decade or two of research must involve the determination of the applicable range of such generalizations, and for tasks that fall beyond that range, developing other and valid generalizations.

We have also looked at some of the factors that increase the probability of a group achieving consensus, but a large percentage of groups never achieve consensus and it is simply majority opinion that prevails. Hence, it seems to me that we need to study the factors in group communication that increase or decrease the probability that the minority will accept majority opinion and those who disagree with the majority opinion will maintain good relations, etc. These goals are important for any continuing group, such as city councils, boards of supervisers, and boards of education. For such groups there are also other goals related to communication which we have not considered in our research.

Another type of group with quite a different sort of goal that group communication scholars have not investigated, so far as I know, is the so-called "creative group"--the group charged with the creation of an advertising campaign, a television program, a theatrical production. Increasingly, these are group efforts and the products are the outgrowth of discussion among the members of the group. It may be worthwhile to study some of these groups to determine the range of generalizability for the theoretical statements that we now have and those developed in the future. For example, do we have generalizations developed on the basis of laboratory brain-storming groups that are valid for these sorts of creative groups or for any sub-set of them?

We also need to question whether the kinds of category systems used in describing groups are adequate: "zero history" vs. "non-zero history," "task-oriented," "problem-solving," "informal," "encounter," "consciousness-raising," etc. When we consider the sorts of groups whose operations we might want to improve, we can see the inadequacy of those categories for they give us no basis for determining whether to categorize a county board of supervisers with a faculty committee charged with revising some university policy, or whether to categorize either one with a chapter of the League of Women Voters deciding whether to endorse a particular political position or a group of political aides deciding on a campaign theme. Even when these various kinds of groups are engaged in similar sorts of tasks, deciding on what position to take on the rights of homosexual teachers, is it meaningful to categorize them in the same way for purposes of generalizing about their communication behaviors and the outcomes of those behaviors? This is both a conceptual and an empirical question to which I believe scholars in our field must give some attention. It may be worth exploring the fruitfulness of defining groups in terms of the perceptions of group members about their individual and collective roles in carrying out any particular task.

Many of the generalizations that we now have about factors that distinguish groups that vary in desired outcomes need to be tested to see whether manipulating those factors in various types of groups alters the probabilities of those outcomes in a predictable way. For example, if we successfully encourage members of a city council or a League of Women Voters discussion group to use more orientation statements of the type that Gouran found distinguished between groups that did and did not achieve

consensus, will we increase the probability that the members of each of these groups will reach agreement or that they will reach it more rapidly?

In doing such testing, field and laboratory studies of group communication need to be better coordinated than they have been, with operational definitions of concepts and other methods sufficiently analogous that the studies in one setting provide adequate tests of the findings and generalizations from the other.

We have talked about zero-history vs non-zero-history groups, but for the latter type of group I wonder whether anyone has looked at the kind of history the group has had--e.g., the way in which it has learned from past successes or failures, or the pattern of successes or failures that it has had? Learning theory suggests that this pattern has an important effect on subsequent communication behaviors of the group members. This possibility ought to be examined.

There are some interesting and potentially useful theoretical approaches or ways of thinking about communication that are being tried in interpersonal communication studies today that should be considered by some of the small group scholars. One is the so-called rules approach. It occurs to me that if we consider the discourse that occurs when a small group is interacting as rule-governed behavior, and attempt to perceive and specify the underlying rules which seem so govern that discourse, we may gain some fresh insights into the process of discussion and some ideas about how that process might be improved. For example, are there generally understood rules that cue members to the point at which differences of opinion have been adequately aired so that a vote can be taken? Or are there rules for changing the topic of discussion or the particular issue or argument being considered which have a high probability of not alienating the other members of the group?

Our useful understandings of group communication might also be aided by adopting some of the approaches of the information processing scholars. We might look, for example, at the processes by which individuals in a group process information from other members--both verbal and nonverbal--about the topics being discussed. Here again, our goal should be to discover ways to make such processing more effective. We need to be concerned also with the information processing which leads to impression formation of others in the group and the effects of that impression formation on one's behaviors toward each of the others.[1]

What I have tried to suggest in these brief remarks are three directions which I believe small group communication scholars need to take:

1) Since it appears that we have attempted to develop general laws that cover a wide range of groups too soon, we should shift our attention to the development of laws of narrower scope, with clear specification of the range of their generalizability. I am not certain what the critical defining characteristics of this range ought to be, but I suspect that, among other things, they include the type of group, its goals, and whether the group is a temporary one organized for a single task or a permanent one that copes with a variety of tasks.

2) We need to develop such general laws or theoretical statements that will be useful outside as well as inside the laboratory--that will be fruitful for improving the operation of these groups in our society. This means that we must study the communication of a wider range

of groups and with a wider range of dependent measures, dependent measures that relate closely to the various important goals of such groups.

3) We ought to explore some of the strategies and concepts being exploited in other kinds of communication research--such as the rules approach, information processing, and policy research--to see whether they can add to our useful understanding of the roles and potential roles of communication in the operation of small groups.

FOOTNOTES

1. The study by Eva M. McMahan on "Nonverbal Communication as a Function of Attribution in Impression Formation" suggests at least one of the ways in which such research might be done. See Communication Monographs, 43 (1976), 287-294.